

VZCZCXRO6932

OO RUEHBC RUEHCD RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHFL RUEHKUK RUEHLA RUEHLH RUEHMOS
RUEHMRE RUEHPW RUEHSR
DE RUEHKB #0339/01 0621239
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 031239Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9776
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUCNOSC/ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN EUROPE IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000339

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/01/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN CONSIDERS CHANGES TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS
LAW, CIRCULATES GOAJ SERMONS TO MOSQUES

REF: 05 BAKU 1836

Classified By: DCM Jason P. Hyland for Reasons 1.4 B and D.

11. (C) Summary: Rafiq Aliyev, Chairman of the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) informed us that the GOAJ has begun writing sermons for Azerbaijan's mosques. Aliyev confirmed news reports that the GOAJ plans to amend the Law on Religious Freedoms to address the threat of Islamic extremism. Separately, Haji Akif Agayev, a senior official at the Caucasus Muslim Board, the SCWRA's rival in the oversight of Islamic affairs, reported continuing friction between the SCWRA and the CMB. Both the SCWRA and CMB cited the political activities of Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, former imam of the Juma Mosque, as a problem. Aliyev added that Ibrahimoglu's campaigning for an opposition candidate in the parliamentary election was evidence of the need to strengthen existing prohibitions on the use of religion for political purposes. The GOAJ is clearly concerned about the potential growth of political Islam in Azerbaijan. We continue to tell the GOAJ that restrictions on religious activities will only spur the growth of Islamic fundamentalism contrary the state's objective of maintaining Azerbaijan's secular tradition. End Summary.

GOAJ WRITING SERMONS FOR MOSQUES, PLANS TO AMEND LAW

12. (C) According to Rafiq Aliyev, head of the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), the GOAJ has started writing and distributing sermons to Azerbaijan's 500 mosques for use on a voluntary basis. Aliyev claimed that Azerbaijani clerics appreciate the GOAJ's efforts, as the sermons are well-researched and peppered liberally with quotes from the Koran. Because most Azerbaijani clerics possess only a primary or secondary education, Aliyev said, the GOAJ-prepared sermons, written by highly trained religious scholars, enable the clerics to speak with more authority among the religious community. To date, the GOAJ has prepared and distributed 12 sermons, and plans to continue the efforts.

13. (C) Aliyev confirmed that the GOAJ plans to amend the Law on Religious Freedom, and reported that the GOAJ is working with experts from the Council of Europe on the proposed changes. The current law issued in 1992 does not reflect current realities, he said. The GOAJ seeks to clarify relations between the state and religion, specifically in regard to religious extremism. To that end, Aliyev said the GOAJ plans to add one new article to the Law on Religious Freedom that specifically prohibits the use of religion for political purposes. Noting that this prohibition already exists in the Law on Political Parties (which stipulates that

parties cannot be based on religion), Aliyev claimed the amendment would not affect the status quo. Nevertheless, the changes to the Law on Religious Freedom were needed to address problems that arose during the 2005 parliamentary campaign, when certain parties and activists tried to mix politics and religion. (This was a thinly veiled reference to the active role played in the campaign by religious activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu on behalf of religiously observant Musavat candidate Rauf Arifoglu.) Religious freedom, Aliyev concluded, must exist within a certain framework.

14. (C) Aliyev believes that Azerbaijani citizens have an increasing interest in Islam and the role of religion in society. The recent controversy of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed, he said, prove his point. The controversy has made the largely secular Azerbaijani population and particularly the intelligentsia more curious about Islam. However, the context in which Azerbaijanis are now thinking about Islam as one religion pitted against others is troubling to Aliyev. Through the SCWRA, Aliyev hopes to promote a message of tolerance that will prevent an anti-Christian backlash.

FRICITION BETWEEN RIVAL RELIGIOUS COMMITTEES BUT AGREEMENT ON IBRAHIMOGLU

15. (C) In a subsequent meeting with Poloff, Haji Akif Agayev, a senior official at the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), reported continued friction between the SCWRA and the CMB over the regulation and oversight of the Muslim community. He suggested that Rafiq Aliyev's SCWRA did not appreciate the separate spheres of politics and faith. Agayev also implied that the CMB Chairman, the spiritual head of the Islamic community throughout the Caucasus' Sheikh Pashazade, was

BAKU 00000339 002 OF 002

irritated at the SCWRA and the GOAJ security forces' increasing intervention in religious matters that were under the jurisdiction of the CMB. Agayev hastened to add that these sorts of disagreements were "normal" and that Aliyev and Pashazade would work out their differences privately.

16. (C) Separately, Agayev told Poloff that the USG should not put much faith in "voices" critical of the CMB. While encouraging the USG to engage all aspects of Islam in Azerbaijan Agayev stressed some religious activists are motivated largely out of self-interest and are often politically driven. When pressed, Agayev named Ilgar Ibrahimoglu as one such religious activist. (In recent talks with Poloff, Ibrahimoglu argued that Islam had a legitimate role in Azerbaijan's political life but that how Islam develops largely depended on the GOAJ action to improve social, political conditions in the coming years. Septel.)

COMMENT

17. (C) The GOAJ is clearly concerned about the public's increasing interest in Islam evidenced in its decision to write sermons for mosques and in Aliyev's public comments. We continue to advise the GOAJ that if it takes actions to restrict the growth of Islam or repress religious freedom to protect society's secular tradition, it will in fact strengthen the attraction of fundamentalist Islam that will work against the state's interest. The GOAJ is well aware of these dangers and appears, at this early stage, to be treading carefully in its effort to stem the growth and development of political Islam. We will follow closely the GOAJ's evolving approach to Islam.

HARNISH